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ABSTRACT

Central Michigan University's experiential learning program and the guidelines for awarding academic credit are described. Graduate students may apply for college credit on the basis of relevant skills which have been acquired as a result of their occupational, military, and personal experiences. The evaluators judge the student's application to determine the number of credits awarded, and the student's advisor decides which credits will apply to particular areas of his or her curriculum. The experiential learning must normally have taken place within seven years of the date of application. Credit is not granted for learning that parallels a previous college course for which credit has been granted. Job experience must involve significant growth that parallels collegiate experience. The maximum amount of experiential learning credit awarded is usually ten hours. These credit hours are usually evenly divided between practical experiences and learning or skills resulting from coursework or training. Three to four years of community work or 1-1/2 to two years of job experience are generally considered sufficient for one credit hour of experiential learning. Procedures for documentation of learning, verification of the student's portfolio, and appeal of the evaluator's judgment are briefly described. (GDC)

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THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM

THE EVALUATION OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATORS CONCERNING GRADUATE STUDENT EVALUATION

Institute for Personal and Career Development
Central Michigan University
Mt. Pleasant, MI 48859

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Preface

THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROGRAM

The Challenge

Today's world, particularly in the area of work, is skill and credential oriented. For good or ill, this is the situation--and sound logic supports it. A complex, ever-changing, modern society rests upon a vast division of labor; its knowledge base continually expands, and new roles appear while older ones become obsolete.

In such an environment, the individual is continually faced with the dual problems of first mastering new competencies, a life-long process dependent on social and technological change, and of then demonstrating the nature and degree of this mastery to others. Graduates of educational institutions increasingly face this need. Many who have not or cannot attend such institutions find these problems compounded. Informal and non-academic training programs proliferate, but occupational mobility and career changes introduce problems in determining competency equivalencies. The question is raised again and again, "How can I convince others of what I know and what I can do?"

This is a difficult question to answer. Complex, abstract or esoteric competencies may be involved. Testing or "on-the-job" demonstrations may be very inefficient, impractical, or even non-existent. Yet the skills, the knowledge, and the mastery are there. How might some of these problems be solved?

One Solution

The concept of awarding academic credit for experiential learning is one solution currently being offered. It goes beyond the traditional limits of its sponsoring institution, the university, by translating the mastery of previously acquired skills and knowledge into the most universal and sound credential coinage

in the land--academic credit. This translation is done without regard for the origin of the mastery, the motive for its acquisition, or the social characteristics of its holder. This can be done because the credit is awarded under the auspices of and by the personnel of an academic community. This requires compliance with the standards and principles which maintain the integrity of the academic community; indeed, any experiential learning program can be acceptable to an academic institution only under these conditions.

Thus, experiential learning credit cannot be made available except as part of a meaningful educational program involving adjunct supervised learning and its evaluation. This requires the student's involvement in a planned program. Questions of validity and reliability inherent in the experiential learning evaluation process itself, as well as the need for assuring foundations of systematic knowledge on the part of experiential learning credit recipients, necessitate this conclusion.

Experiential Learning and Academic Credit

The Central Michigan University Experiential Learning Program exists to translate into academic credit the knowledge, skills, and competencies of individuals seeking academic degrees through the University's Institute for Personal and Career Development. Such knowledge and skills may have been obtained prior to or concurrently with the student's present program, but they must have been obtained from a non-academically accredited source or not otherwise be available for academic credit through the transfer of credit.

Such non-academically accredited learning experiences can be conveniently analyzed into three categories: (1) formal income-producing activities (job skills); (2) non-academically accredited formal training programs and courses (self-enrichment); (3) informal learning experiences (personal growth). Actually these areas are only conceptually distinct; in reality, all overlap and may be mutually enhancin

It is assumed that--like a rose--knowledge is knowledge and skill is skill; their source is irrelevant once their mastery is obtained. Indeed, people are naturally highly efficient learning mechanisms; most inevitably accumulate competencies through the simple process of living and acting in society. Also, many persons, for reasons of social origins, historical conditions, personal or psychological makeup, or other determinants of differential opportunity, cannot or do not obtain the same competencies that others have obtained in academic settings with duly awarded credit. For all these persons, the Experiential Learning Program offers the opportunity for the translation of existing knowledge, skills and competencies--their experiential learning--into academic credit.

The individual benefits from this in that he or she is facilitated in acquiring a degree that demonstrates his or her mastery of specific competencies. But, the Experiential Learning Program also serves the public good. It enhances the acquisition and updating of new and needed knowledge and skills and recognizes in a socially useful way the mastery of previously acquired competencies. In these ways, potentially wasted human resources are conserved and cultivated to produce future growth.

CMU and Experiential Learning

Just as society is complex, so is an individual's social experience. Thus, the translation of experiential learning into academic credit can never be entirely cut and dried, the simple result of bureaucratic fiat or the statistical summary of a questionnaire's responses. A judgmental aspect inevitably pervades the process. This is not to say that every effort should not be made to enhance objectivity; rather, the well trained and equipped evaluator, armed with both general and specialized knowledge and adhering to the highest professional standards for honesty and dedication, constitutes the core of the process.

To this end, a Team of faculty members was created on the campus of Central Michigan University to award experiential learning credit. The team's charge was the development of the philosophy of the Experiential Learning Program, of the procedures for evaluating applicants, and of the criteria for the translation of experiential learning into academic credit.

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GUIDELINES FOR EVALUATORS OF GRADUATE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Experiential Learning (E.L.) graduate credits are awarded to students enrolled in Central Michigan University graduate programs offered through its Institute for Personal and Career Development for knowledge acquired from personal and professional experiences.

One E.L. team member reviews each student's "Application for Graduate Experiential Learning Credit," and after appropriate evaluation, the learning reflected and documented in these experiences is translated into special course titles. Credit is determined by the applicability of the learning to the graduate program and by the depth of the learning.

DISTRIBUTION:

Applications are distributed randomly to team members. If the evaluator knows the student whose application has been assigned for evaluation, the evaluator returns the application for redistribution.

The student's application and the evaluator's recommendations are forwarded to the team coordinator, whose responsibilities include determining that the guidelines are being interpreted correctly and consistently by all members of the evaluation team. The coordinator may make policy-related changes, and will forward this information to the evaluator.

The E.L. process should be completed within four weeks if an application is "nonexceptional and correctly completed." The goal is a maximum time of six weeks.

CREDENTIALS:

The E.L. team is the only authorized body in the Institute for Personal and Career Development to award experiential learning credit. No E.L. credit can be awarded without utilization of the team's procedures, policies and criteria, and

the team is responsible and accountable for all experiential learning credit given through the Institute. No party in the Institute can countermand its decisions on experiential learning credit.

ADVISORS:

Although the E.L. team determines the amount and title of E.L. credits the student may be awarded on the transcript, actual distribution of the credits within a student's program is the prerogative of the student's advisor. The advisor determines how many of the E.L. credits are applicable to the program and for which areas they will apply.

NATURE OF DEGREE:

Experiential Learning is to be evaluated in terms of the degree and area of concentration pursued by the individual student. Each Institute degree has a set of areas of study in which students must demonstrate competence before fulfilling degree requirements, and E.L.'s are one way in which competence in these areas of study may be demonstrated. Accordingly, many valid learning experiences fully deserving graduate credit will not be evaluated as applicable to a specific degree program. For example, a student enrolled in the Personnel Management program would not be awarded credit for "community services," although "supervision" would certainly be applicable. Graduate E.L. evaluations do not follow a practice of recognizing electives even though a student may have gained considerable expertise in one or more areas unrelated to the degree. For this reason, a student pursuing multiple areas of concentration (i.e., Personnel Management and Industrial Management) should have noted all program desires on the evaluation form or should request an additional evaluation when adding a second or third area of concentration.

SEVEN-YEAR LIMIT:

The last seven years of a student's experiences (from date of application) normally constitute the time frame for experiences acceptable for E.L. credit. Technology and social change outdate the relevance of most experiences in terms of their applicability to a contemporary college degree. Computers change, management theories evolve, and new leadership techniques are developed. The march of time affects all learning and we would be remiss if we did not set some parameters recognizing this human condition. This seven-year limit may seem somewhat arbitrary, but it is consistent with the time limit set by the graduate school for applicability of transfer credit.

Although the more recent the learning experience the more appropriate the experience would be for receipt of E.L. credit, learning is developmental. A student might have felt justified in extending the E.L. application to cover earlier practical experiences and training pertinent to the degree pursued. Some experiences directly related to experiences covered in the seven-year time frame might have contributed to the ease of developing in a new position or have promoted advanced standing and placement in the present position. Other experiences (e.g., community organizing, fund raising) which are not made obsolete with time may not be related to experiences covered in the seven-year time frame.

Any evaluator awarding E.L. credit for learning acquired prior to the seven-year time limit must justify the deviation in writing.

REVIEW OF COURSEWORK:

Evaluators should carefully examine both graduate and undergraduate student transcripts before assigning credit. E.L. credit should not be given for learning that parallels learning from an accredited* class. Therefore, credit at the

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*Entered on an official graduate or undergraduate transcript and accepted as transfer credit.

introductory level would not be assigned to a student with a previous major or substantial coursework in the same area. For example, a student with a bachelor's degree in Accounting would not be given credit for Introductory Practices of Accounting.

Under normal conditions, only work experiences and training sessions occurring after the undergraduate degree has been completed will be considered for Experiential Learning evaluation and credit. Exceptions may be made in some cases, such as work experiences unrelated to the undergraduate degree and advanced work experiences over and above the competencies normally gained in an undergraduate degree program. For example, a working student may enter the program immediately after spending several years completing requirements for a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. This student could still receive credit for Advanced Administration for his or her work as a departmental head. Any such exceptions must be requested in writing by the evaluator and will be monitored with extreme care. Approval will be granted only with the coordinator's consent.

Similarly, E.L. credit for practical experiences would not be awarded for the time period in which a student only worked with and refined collegiate learning. For example, a student with a bachelor's degree in Counseling would not be given credit for counseling techniques utilized in a position that only applies formal learning experiences.

A student must evidence growth in the job before being eligible for E.L. credit that parallels collegiate experiences. Either a non-routine promotion, evidence of newly acquired knowledge from training programs, or the assignment of decidedly advanced tasks would constitute such evidence. As a guideline, the evaluator should be hesitant about giving any E.L. credit related to accredited coursework until the student has been involved for at least 18 months in the practical utilization of this learning.

No evaluator should evaluate an E.L. application unless the date of the

baccalaureate degree is specifically noted on the application and a complete transcript(s) of undergraduate courses is included.

HOURS AWARDED:

The evaluator should consider ten hours the normal maximum number of hours for which a graduate student may receive E.L. credit and the average award is usually much less. Any greater number than 10 must be approved by a second evaluator and the coordinator at the request of the initial evaluator. Under no circumstances will more than 15 hours be awarded.

PRACTICAL VERSUS TRAINING EXPERIENCES:

Students may earn credit for both unsponsored practical experiences and nonaccredited sponsored training or coursework. Both of these may include work-related experiences and community or personal activities. For example, an employee may be evaluated in terms of his or her work as a personnel administrator and for company-sponsored courses dealing with personnel relations. A Chamber of Commerce member could be evaluated in terms of his or her active leadership within the organization and/or for civically relevant courses taken in conjunction with the Chamber.

Students normally gain about half their credit from practical experiences and the rest from training coursework. Therefore, five hours is usually considered to be the maximum assessment for practical experiences and five more for coursework or training. However, credit should be awarded on a priority basis for learning that is most closely related to the specific areas of study for the degree(s) being sought. If an especially competent individual is approaching the maximum number of hours for E.L. credit, the nature of the degree takes precedence over the usual five-five division.

CREDIT HOURS FOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:

A. The following guidelines roughly equate credit and practical on-the-job experiential learning:

18 to 24 months = 1 credit hour

25 to 36 months = 2 credit hours

37 to 60 months = 3 credit hours

60 months or more = 4 credit hours

B. With regard to community or personal practical experiential learning, the following equation should apply:

36 to 48 months = 1 credit hour

49 to 72 months = 2 credit hours

72 months or more = 3 credit hours

These guidelines assume that work-related experiential learning usually demands more time, more intense involvement, and greater attention than nonvocational concerns. However, it must be noted that the guidelines apply only for experiential learning considered graduate-level and directly related to the nature of the degree. In order to be accredited, the E.L. must be related to the content of the student's graduate curriculum.

In addition, intense and time-consuming assignments demand special consideration. For instance, a General Accounting Office auditor might need to develop specialized knowledge about environmental programs in order to coordinate a rigorous on-site investigation. Likewise, rapid advancement within an organization could be considered evidence of superior performance and, thus, greater learning.

Combinations of experiential learning also deserve mention. No one does just one thing at a time, and students may receive credit for concurrent work experiential learning. For instance, a student in an Industrial Management curriculum might be primarily involved in "supervision" and receive credit in that area. However, a portion of that individual's work might also involve "quality control"

and credit could be awarded there as well. Because of less intense involvement, however, "quality control" would undoubtedly be awarded less credit than "supervision."

Evaluation of practical experiential learning should be considered only after students have fully described their individual experiences and related the learning from these experiences to resulting competencies. Each postion held and each task performed should be described. The student's duties should be clear to the evaluator and the evaluator should be certain that the student has more than descriptive command of his or her assignment. The student should have presented evidence of growth in the position(s) and have described by example how learning relevant to degree interests has occurred. A demonstrated increase in responsibilities, the assignment of new tasks, specific job-related successes, or the development of a new program might serve as evidence. In other words, the student should have provided self-assessment of competencies pursuant to the individual degree.

C. Training experiential learning, either as individual courses or as related combinations, should be equated as follows:

24 to 36 clock hours = 1 credit hour
37 to 48 clock hours = 2 credit hours
48 or more clock hours = 3 credit hours

Training experiential learning must be substantively applicable to graduate-level credit and related to the student's degree. Proof of substantive content, achieved competencies, and applicability must rest with the individual student. Students, therefore, should have provided a course outline for each training session and a written attempt to justify the evaluation of each session for graduate credit.

It is especially important that courses be evaluated with the nature of the degree in mind. No blanket policies exist to award a set amount of credit for

any course even though American Council on Education (ACE) guidelines do provide equations, e.g., three hours of international relations should be awarded for completion of Command and General Staff by correspondence. The evaluation philosophy of the E.L. team insists on individually based assessments of prior learning experiences and ACE guidelines are followed only when appropriate for the student portfolio under consideration.

Military courses demand special scrutiny since the Armed Forces provide an especially large number of courses for both career and non-career personnel as well as for both officers and enlisted personnel. For the most part, these courses emphasize introductory-level skills which are essentially undergraduate in comparison to skills acquired from campus courses. Exceptions occur in two general categories:

1) Advanced officer courses: courses in this area offer general training for future command experiences, emphasizing a combination of general management, international affairs and defense-strategy competencies. Courses include those offered through the various Command and Staff programs, the National Security Management programs, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces programs. Recent residence programs in these areas are transferable; therefore, E.L. credit is not generally appropriate except for courses completed by correspondence and "older" versions, which are ordinarily subject to the seven-year rule. If questions arise, consult ACE guidelines before awarding credit.

2) Advanced standing preparatory courses: several well defined courses are designed to prepare persons already involved in the field for specific job assignments. For the most part, these advanced-level courses relate to military support functions, such as logistics, personnel relations, financial management or inventory control. The most common of these courses require between 100-700 hours of class time although several seminars, usually of an "update" nature, are available and meet for less than 40 hours. Because of the large number of

these courses and because their subject matter is continually evolving, ACE guidelines are presently unavailable.

If there is evidence of substantial preparation for the course and/or of post-course assignments, fewer clock hours are required to generate E.L. credit. E.L. evaluators, all of whom are CMU faculty members, should determine the weight of these assignments based on their own experiences teaching graduate-level courses. Usually there should be evidence of approximately 40 hours of course preparation/post-assignments for each graduate hour of credit awarded, if actual class time is less than recommended.

DOCUMENTATION:

Students should have documented all practical work experiential learning as outlined in the "Application for Graduate Experiential Learning Credit." Otherwise, credit will be withheld. Certificates or (should certificates be unavailable) supporting letters should be submitted for each training experience. If evaluations were made available to students, these too should be included in the E.L. presentation. Finally, the evaluator must be certain that each application for E.L. evaluation has been properly notarized in the "Applicant Signature Block."

VERIFICATION, DOCUMENTATION, AND FRAUD:

The evaluator will request a check if he or she feels the E.L. application is not properly verified, if the documentation appears suspicious, or if he or she feels the validity of any portion of the application is questionable. Every tenth E.L. application is assigned an automatic spot check on some element in the application. Any irregularities resulting from the spot check are considered grounds for a complete investigation of the application.

In cases of fraud or deception, the entire E.L. team will determine appropriate action. Since most checks will be carried out after the evaluation process has

been completed, the E.L. team has the authority to withdraw previously awarded credit and, if the situation warrants, refuse a refund to the student involved. If the student involved wishes to appeal the decision of the E.L. team, he or she may inform the director of the Institute and the case may be brought to the Academic Council for final consideration. The coordinator will represent the team's interests in such appeals.

LEVEL OF EXPERIENCES:

The E.L. team recognizes various levels of learning experiences and these levels may be reflected in course titles awarded.

THE COORDINATOR'S ROLE:

Most graduate E.L. portfolios (experience shows) fall within the guidelines presented here, and the coordinator need only examine the evaluation for consistency and thoroughness.

However, in some cases, the prescribed guidelines will be too rigid. An evaluator might decide that more than five hours for either practical or training experiences would be justified, or a student might deserve credit or advanced-level credit after only a few months on the job. If any deviation of this sort is thought necessary, the evaluator must request permission from the coordinator before assigning credit beyond the range of the general guidelines. If the coordinator finds these deviations acceptable, the coordinator will add the credit to the evaluation. Should the deviations be unacceptable to the coordinator, the coordinator will return the rejected material to the initial evaluator, and, if the evaluator disagrees with the coordinator, the matter will be brought to the E.L. Team for arbitration, subject to majority decision of the quorum.*

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*Majority of assigned voting members by name.

APPEALS:

Student-initiated appeals must be received in the Institute home office within six weeks after the student is notified of the credit awarded for E.L. (i.e., date of the letter awarding credit). The E.L. clerk will return the appealed application to the original evaluator. Within a week the evaluator will return the appealed application to the coordinator, who will then examine the evaluator's recommendations and have the E.L. clerk assign the portfolio to a second evaluator. Reevaluations may result in more or less credit being awarded. Following the second evaluator's review, the reevaluation will be routed to the coordinator. If disagreements arise between the evaluators, the reevaluation will be submitted to the entire E.L. team for decision by a majority of the quorum.* No further reevaluations will be allowed.

ADDITIONAL E.L.:

If in the course of pursuing a degree, a student acquires additional, non-accredited experiential learning eligible for E.L. evaluation, that student will be eligible to apply for additional credit. This will not be considered a reevaluation. The new E.L. application will be reviewed by the original evaluator, unless the original evaluator is unavailable. If a new evaluator reviews this new application, the results of the evaluation will be sent to the original evaluator for informational purposes.

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*Majority of assigned voting members by name.